

# Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired

TACKLING THE CHALLENGE OF MAKING SERIOUS CHANGES

by Shelley Watts

Growing up, I was arrogant about what and how much I could eat. As a young person, I was very tall and skinny, and I loved eating sugary cereal (to which I added enough sugar to drink the sugary milk from the bottom of the bowl). Still, it was not until after college that I started to gain weight. The reason for the weight gain couldn't have been the multiple slices of ham and cheese with a very thick coating of mayonnaise on my sandwiches for lunch. It couldn't have been my big breakfasts of eggs, sausage, home fries, toast, butter, and coffee with lots of cream and sugar. It couldn't have been the candies, cookies, desserts, potato chips, and popcorn with lots of butter. And it certainly couldn't have been that none of these were consumed in normal amounts.

I went to college a skinny 120 pounds at 5'10" and graduated weighing 140 pounds, still a normal weight. During the job years, I slowly increased from 140 to 180 pounds, yet not noticing or feeling like I had a problem. In my mid-50s, I topped out at 240 pounds. At one point my doctor diagnosed diabetes and gave me some information on the disease, which I conveniently ignored. I wondered why she hadn't warned me earlier about this disease, but even after being diagnosed, I didn't take it seriously. I tested my blood sugar when I felt like it (which wasn't often), and the numbers were always high. Having a fasting blood sugar of over 300 was common and acceptable to me. Did any of this cause me to change? No, I doubled down. Over the Easter holidays, when homemade peanut butter eggs were available, I supported the local church ladies by buying more than a hundred dollars' worth each year. Then there was the ice

cream cone incident: I bought a 24-pack of mini-ice cream cones for my brother and ate all of them that evening. I felt horrible physically for the next several days, and emotionally, I was ashamed—but not ashamed enough to change. I called sugar my drug of choice, and my sister said, "Well, at least it's not drugs"—except that sugar is a drug.

So, what changed? I liked to travel and learned how to discreetly ask for the seat belt extender on planes. I had hoped to take a dream vacation to Australia someday but knew that my size and health made that less and less likely. I told myself that job stress was the problem, but after retirement, my eating habits and health got even worse. By late 2018, I knew things were bad, but I didn't realize how bad. And I knew things were going to get worse if I wasn't willing to make serious changes. I was out of control, especially with sugar, salt, and fat, and knew I couldn't fix this by myself. I had maxed out on six medications to treat my diabetes and high blood pressure. My doctor wanted me on insulin immediately because I had an A1C of 14, but I begged her to give me more time. That's when I made the commitment to truly get healthy this time. I knew that I would need God's help to be successful. I prayed and researched websites about healthy eating and fasting and started looking for a place to go for help. I watched hours of the Mastering Diabetes summit (thanks to Robby Barbaro and Cyrus Khambatta) in addition to reading and learning as much as I could about this new lifestyle. By spring of 2019, I had given up cheese and eggs and a few months later enjoyed my last burger.



In June of 2019, I went to the Fasting Escape Retreat Center headed by Dr. Nathan Gershfeld. At the age of 65, I was finally making a major, serious decision to do something about my health. I arrived at the retreat and started a month-long program. Dr. Gershfeld explained what was going to happen; I asked questions, and he had answers. I was scared, but I knew that this was going to be life-changing.

It began with ten days of preparation by eating a fully compliant WFPB diet. My first meal there was a very large, colorful, tasty, and healthy salad. It took a long time to eat; I usually inhaled my food, so my jaws were exhausted after all the chewing!

During that prep period, I was fed physically, mentally, and emotionally. My attitude about food, my health and body, and my way of interacting with doctors all changed during that time. Also, my blood pressure and blood sugar moved almost to normal, allowing us to gradually reduce and then stop all of my medications related to diabetes, hypertension, and water retention. This was a necessary step prior to fasting. Then I began a 17-day, water-only fast (during which my only med was a half-dose



of thyroid medicine), followed by eight days of refeeding. In addition to losing 20 pounds, my blood pressure went from 180/80 to 126/64, and my blood sugar dropped from 227 to 83. My inflammation was almost gone, and I went from nine to one medication, the monthly cost dropping from \$135 to \$9. Now, all I take is a low dose of the thyroid med plus vitamins B and D.

I will always be thankful to Dr. Gershfeld for his knowledge, his expertise, and his true desire to help his patients succeed. Not only did he take care of me with daily medical supervision, he taught me (great lectures!), fed me (yes, he can cook!), and proved himself to be an amazing problem-solver. While I have no proof, I believe Dr. Gershfeld saved my life. I was probably six months to a year away from a major heart attack or stroke. I also want to acknowledge Dr. Kelli Greene, who listened and helped me start my new health journey, and Chef Luz Correa, who taught an old home economics teacher how to cook! I returned home with better health than I'd had in more than 20 years. That is the power of fasting and healthy, whole-food, plant-based eating!

I committed, and I'm all in! I love eating "all plants all the time." I plan and prep food and have chosen to eat toward my healthy future. Do I miss some of my trigger foods? Yes, but not enough to go back. That's the old Shelley; this is the new Shelley.

## I feel healthy because I am healthy, and that beats sugar every day.

Before my transformation, even a short walk required several rest breaks, and walking uphill? No! Now, I'm out walking daily with ease—even uphill. I hadn't gotten down on the floor for several years; I simply avoided it. Now, on purpose, I get up and down off the floor daily because I can.

Last winter, I slipped and fell. It was like slow-motion, but I did hit the ground hard enough to break my glasses, and my face and knees slammed into the sidewalk. Now, the old Shelley would have just lain on the ground hurt, crying, and hoping someone

would find her and help, but the new Shelley just busted out laughing, rolled over, and got up.

I am very thankful to God for my greatly improved health. I'm 70 pounds lighter and have consistently healthy lab results, my inflammation is almost gone, and my dentist has said my teeth and gums are healthier than ever. I laugh a lot. For the first time in years, I went clothes shopping. How exciting to buy medium-sized clothes instead of my previous women's 2X! I even had to have my ring sized down!

I revamped my kitchen to support my new lifestyle, and I'm a fixture at the local farmers markets. My meals are works of art; I find joy in trying new foods and beautifully arranging colorful meals. Eat the rainbow!

I look forward to that future trip to Australia. I won't have to squeeze into a seat and skip the walking tours. It won't just be a trip; it will be fun, amazing, and adventurous.

The past two years have been a challenge, but it was, and is, doable. It has allowed me to start living, "really, really" living. I wake up with joy and excitement about my days. I feel healthy because I *am* healthy, and that beats sugar every day.

I want to thank the National Health Association for their dedication and hard work. I joined after reading my first issue of *Health Science*. Although I am a retired teacher, I still want and love to learn, and this organization has helped me greatly as I navigate this new chapter of my life. I recently attended my first conference—absolutely amazing!

Finally, I want to thank my family for their love and support, especially Allison, my sister, best friend, and cheerleader. On my first WFPB Christmas, I was very nervous about being in a home with a lot of my old temptations. I cooked and prepped for days to be away from my home, worried that Christmas would be spent grazing all day and evening on unhealthy foods that I no longer wanted to eat. My sister came up with a thoughtful plan to move the sugary treats to a different, acceptable location. Dinner would usually have been hours of just eating; instead, we ate, cleared the table, and moved into the living room. I made oatmeal-fruit bars to help, and what happened was I had a wonderful holiday with my family with a few changes from our regular traditions. I am blessed! 🌱